

Statement of Iris J. Toyer
Before the Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Committee on Government Reform
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Good morning, Chairman Davis and members of the Committee. My name is Iris J. Toyer. I am a District of Columbia resident and D.C. Public School parent. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today on behalf of tens of thousands of parents in the District of Columbia who strongly believe in public education and want a system of public schools that is capable of delivering a quality education for their children.

My association with the D.C. Public schools (DCPS) goes back to 1956 when I first entered kindergarten at Stanton Elementary School. I am a DCPS graduate and the mother of four, three of whom are DC Public School graduates. My eleven-year-old son is a fifth grader at Stanton Elementary School in S.E. Washington. I am the PTA president at my child's school.

At the citywide level working on public school funding and reform issues, I am the co-chair of Parents United for the D.C. Public Schools. We are a volunteer citywide parent organization established in 1980 to support quality public education in the District of Columbia. We issue reports on a range of school finance and school reform issues. The mission of Parents United is to empower parents and the community with information and advocacy skills to transform D.C. Public Schools to ensure educational success for all our children. I say these things so that you know I come to this discussion as an informed parent and not solely on the basis of my own children's experience with the city's public schools. That said, I am here today as the parent of a child in a No Child Left Behind School that is also a Transformation School.

The current debate over vouchers in the District of Columbia has caused me to wonder how a voucher program would impact my school and its students. Stanton is a

Title I school with over 630 students. Over 90% of our students are eligible for free and reduced lunch and presumably would be eligible for a voucher under H.R. 684.

The proposal has superficial appeal: What could possibly be wrong with giving at least a few children an opportunity to escape a public school system that often fails to educate its students adequately? While perhaps well meaning, I think the proposal is misguided for a number of reasons.

First, there are better options that will serve an entire school community. I mentioned that Stanton is a Transformation School. This means that after careful review by a team sent in to assess our school, the Superintendent designated Stanton for transformation—or reconstitution. We are one of fifteen such schools in the system.

In short, our school was shut down and reopened with a new administrative team. Our new principal was able to select a new staff – the only limitation being that no more than 50% of the former teaching staff could return. During our first year of transformation additional resources programmatic and human, facility enhancements, staff training and development and more have been put in place. The best part is that no Stanton student had to leave the community to receive better educational opportunities and so we call ourselves the New Stanton School. Immediately after Stanton being named a Transformation School we were also placed on the list as a No Child Left Behind school. I can tell you that last school year our population was approximately 640. Currently we have 636 students most of whom live in-boundary and walk to school. None of our parents exercised the option to leave for greener pastures at a “higher performing” school.

Our school system gets the rap for a lot of missteps—and many of them deservedly so—Transformation Schools has not been one of them. Turning schools around is a costly proposition and it takes patience and planning. There are many other public schools that are ripe for transformation. My greatest concern is that because of

the city's failure to fully fund public education, this initiative will be stalled and/or terminated. I believe that the Transformation Schools initiative is a far better investment for federal dollars and parallels the tenets of No Child Left Behind than handing out individual tuition vouchers where there is not opportunity to track student performance. Transformation as well as other public schools must report yearly progress or lack thereof and there are accountability mechanisms in place to help parents and the public make decisions.

Many of the parents with whom I speak fear that public education in DC is fast becoming a nuisance to some of our elected officials. We feel like our schools are being abandoned and relegated to the category of just another human service. Recent statements of voucher support encouraging residents to pull their children out of the city's public schools to place them in private or parochial schools in and outside of the District of Columbia sends the signal that they have just given up. The suggestion has even been made that vouchers will engender competition and make the public schools better. Well, if our public schools were as well funded as some of the city's private schools I might agree. However, the very folk who tell us this have never fully funded a budget for the D.C. public schools. Just like doctors take an oath, I believe it is also the duty of elected leadership--local and national—"to first do no harm."

D.C. Public Schools like all urban school systems across this country is struggling to meet the demands of its students. As a parent I have been disappointed that the pace has not been faster in making significant in educational outcomes for children. However, I do know that there are several promising initiatives underway that should and have yield positive results. For example, the Teaching Fellows program that brings in career changers as new teachers; Teach For America that provides recent college graduates who were not education majors but have an interest in teaching—we have several at our school; New Leaders for New Schools, an exciting and rigorous new

program that will train and provide hands on experience over a 15 month period to a group of individuals to prepare them to become school principals; and the implementation of the Masters Facility Plan that will rebuild or renovate every school in the city. It of course needs to be funded so that it does not wither and die. There are numerous other initiatives underway that the School Board President and administration should be able to speak to.

In my estimation legislation to address education issues in the District already exists—the No Child Left Behind Act. Whether one fully agrees with the Act or not, it has been a mechanism to help school systems organize around a set of principals in terms of educating children. It unfortunately did not come with the necessary funding to make its implementation fully possible.

At the local school level the mandates have wreaked havoc on school plans. One of the requirements to offer students the opportunity to move from school to school if the performance of the current school is underperforming, at some point gets to be ridiculous. At some point it is merely a shell game that does nothing to improve the student's chance to succeed. We want every school to be a high performing one; I think that approaching the problem as this school system has done with its Transformation Schools achieves the goal of NCLB without destroying the fabric of the community.

Finally, I would suggest that vouchers do not address, much less meet, and the most urgent needs borne by District public school students. The school system is facing a financial crisis that will stall its current reform efforts, its initiatives to transform low performing schools, its plans for improving teacher quality and operating efficiency. One of the greatest needs is for renovation of the city's crumbling school facilities. Today, about 2/3 of the District's public schools are in need of emergency repairs for, among other things, leaking roofs, archaic plumbing and electrical systems, asbestos abatement, broken doors, rotted windows, broken toilets and sinks, and dysfunctional

heating and cooling systems. These broken facilities impair our children's education and, at times, threaten their health and safety.

This dire situation arises after many years of neglect during which the District has deferred school maintenance in order to pay for what were then considered to be more immediate classroom needs. Critical maintenance is still being delayed; the District's 2004 budget proposal calls for slashing about 40% of the funds DCPS requested for maintenance. Helping a few families pay private school tuition bills is no answer to the DCPS high school students' petitions pleading for help with unsanitary bathrooms. Under these circumstances, the first priority of any party seeking to improve educational opportunities in the District is to fix the buildings attended by the vast majority of our children.

Second, not only will vouchers not fix DC's broken public schools, they will, at best, provide additional educational opportunity for a handful of students only by abandoning and neglecting the children remaining in the public schools. Public schools are the means by which we fulfill our responsibility to educate our children and thereby prepare them to be responsible citizens and enable them to compete for jobs and other economic opportunities as adults. DC Public Schools (and Charter Schools) must admit *all* children; while vouchers use public tax dollars to permit *private schools to choose* whatever students they want. One can be certain that private schools will tend not to choose students with special education requirements, limited or no English proficiency, behavior problems or with low levels of academic achievement. Those students will be left to the public schools whose funding, in the meantime, has been diminished by the loss of students whose needs are not so costly.

Furthermore, in 2004 the funding allocated to vouchers might be able to afford between 1400 and 1867 scholarships in awards ranging from \$3750-\$5000, if not a penny is used to administer the program. However, a survey by the 21st Century School

Fund, a local advocacy organization, reveals that only 32 private and parochial schools in DC charge tuition below \$5,000, and those serve only 4181 students in grades K-12. If 10% of the current slots in those schools were to be devoted to vouchers, only 418 students would be able to use the vouchers in the District without having to afford the balance of tuition costs and other mandatory fees at a higher priced school.

How could a family living at the poverty level afford the balance of tuition at other private schools? The voucher becomes nothing more than a tease for such families. And what about those families who don't find a slot in a private school in DC? With so few spaces, other voucher recipients may find themselves bussing their children all the way to Fairfax or Falls Church city to find an available slot at that price. In those circumstances, vouchers will succeed in disrupting fragile family lives, leaving children in the region's notorious traffic jams for hours, and reviving the forced bussing programs that our nation has finally managed to end.

Third, the schools that receive public tax dollars for private purposes will not have to comply with the same standards of accountability and reporting that our public schools do. It is quite surprising that Congress, after so proudly accomplishing the No Child Left Behind legislation, would allow, or especially encourage, public money to be used without the same level of accountability that it now mandates to the nation's public schools. A voucher school can be eligible to participate in the program if it serves 25 students for three years. Such a school could not begin to compare its educational offerings to those of public schools. Such low standards of eligibility are an affront to the U.S. taxpayer who envisions much more comprehensive programs being delivered with his or her education dollars.

I believe that any experiment with children's education must be researched based and have some possibility of improving a situation before it is implemented wholesale on a school community. Time and again we read that the voucher programs

in New York, Cleveland and Milwaukee have not provided the type of success its proponents promised.

Finally, as a lifelong residents of the District of Columbia the Congressional imposition of a voucher experiment in the District is a direct attack on Home Rule. It is not even remotely conceivable that Congress would impose a voucher program in Houston or Miami if the Texas or Florida congressional delegations opposed the program. While the District, of course, lacks voting representation in Congress, our only delegate, Eleanor Holmes Norton, has spoken out forcefully against the voucher proposal. Moreover, Ms. Norton's view mirrors that of her constituents – a recent poll by the National School Board Association found that 76 percent of District voters do not support the establishment of vouchers in the District.

In short, I am grateful that the President and members of Congress are interested in improving education in the District. Simply put, however, if they want to help, the first priority should be to keep public dollars in publicly accountable schools where they can be used to serve all children, not a small, select minority.